When I told my friends I was going to exchange to Seoul, South Korea, they all asked me the same question: why? For most of the people, Europe may be their first choice when they choose a school to exchange. However, South Korea always has a special kind of magic that attracts me, and I did not regret my choice. As a student majoring in International Studies, I chose Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea as my first choice to exchange, and spent a wonderful semester there from September 2015 to December 2015.

The thought of going to exchange and living in a whole different country already excited me in the summer. For most of my friends, the most exciting but also the most worrying part might be the thought to survive by themselves oversea. Leaving their parents for the first time is a scary thing to think of. “How am I going to survive? Will I be so homesick that make me not enjoy my trip at all?” However, as long as you start to plan for your exchange, you will find yourself having no time to worry, as there is so much to do in Korea and you are already too excited about the things that you are going to see.

My planning started with exploring things to do and eat in Seoul and in other cities in South Korea. When looking for information about tourist spots, I found the website “VisitKorea” very useful. It not only introduces attractions, travelling information, transportation and accommodations, but also includes must-try-food and popular shopping locations. The website of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Vancouver will help you prepare for your application for student visa. An event that I found very helpful was the nomination section held by exchange advisors from SFU. The information section gave out a lot of guidelines about preparing for exchange, such as document required to submit, things need to do three to four months prior to departure, tips for completing the host institution application, and passport and immigration information. After the nomination section we met volunteer students that went exchanged before and came to share their experience and answer any specific questions about different host institutions and countries. I met some students that went to South Korea, and they gave me lots of useful information, such as useful apps for smartphone that would make life easier in Seoul. It was a good opportunity to help me further prepare for exchange.
After looking at exchange questionnaires and exchange reports from former students that went to South Korea, I started to pack and book my air ticket. As I went to Korea in the fall, it was summer for the first half of the semester and winter for the second half. I only brought summer clothing as I knew I could buy winter clothing there. The winter in Seoul was colder than the winter in Vancouver, so I knew my winter jacket would not be enough. Also, there are a lots of choice of clothes in Korea, so I really recommend bringing few summer clothing and buy the rest there. For travel and transportation, I booked my air ticket right after I received my acceptance letter from Yonsei. There is direct flight from Vancouver to Incheon (the city where the airport is located), and there are some choices to go to Yonsei from the airport. Direct bus takes about an hour and costs about $10, subway is cheaper but you will need to carry your luggage for a long walk and change the subway line for several times. Taxi is another option if you are travelling with big luggage and you know someone who can share the fees with you as it is quite costly to take the taxi. For financial details, opening a bank account in Korea is easy as Yonsei has a bank on campus and is experienced in opening bank account for exchange student. You will get a debit card, and ATM is everywhere. Street food and fashion stores only accept cash for most of them, restaurants usually accept debit card and department stores will accept foreign credit card. The cost of living is overall cheaper than Vancouver. Food is definitely cheaper by half, transportation is cheap, and the cost for entertainment is also cheaper. Clothes, shoes, cosmetics and other goods will depend on where you are buying it. Clothes in department stores is usually expensive, but they often have sale events and things tend to be cheaper. Products from local cosmetic stores are cheap but the quality is acceptable.

Yonsei provides on-campus housing for exchange student, but the space is limited. The facilities in the dorm were in good quality, and the location was convenient. The dorm was about 10 minute walk from the main campus, and there were restaurants and convenient stores located in the dorm. There were bus stops located about 2 minute walk from the dorm, and the bus there can take you to any part of Seoul. No need to worry if there is no space in the dorm, Yonsei will provide information on off-campus housing. For academic details, the lecture format, schedules and grading were similar with SFU, but Yonsei took attendance for every class.
There was a lot to do in South Korea. One of the biggest events in the fall is “Yon Ko Jeon (연고전),” and it is a must-do event as an exchange student in Yonsei. Yonsei University and Korea University are rivals as they each claims to be the best private university in South Korea. Yon Ko Jeon illustrated the rivalry, as it is the event for annual sports matches between the two universities. Some of the sports matches include soccer and baseball. Apart from the sport matches, cheerleading is also a big part of Yon Ko Jeon. Cheerleaders from each university lead the audience to sing, dance and cheer for their team. Even celebrities will appear in videos made by students from each university to support the team. During Yon Ko Jeon, I felt their passion toward promoting their school spirit, and it was something that I had never experienced before.

When it was time to leave Seoul, I felt really sad and there was still a lot of things I wanted to experience in Korea. This exchange trip taught me a lot, such as taking opportunities when they are available, and do as much as you can, so you won’t regret. I also learned to treasure every moment and enjoy every second. For students that are going to Yonsei, cherish this opportunity. It will be one of the best memories you have in your life.